

Women in the Landscape of TS Eliot's *The Wasteland*

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Abstract— TS Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* is considered as one of the most remarkable achievements of Modernist poetry. *The Wasteland* portrays the moral, spiritual and psychological disintegration and fragmentation of the society after the first world war. The *Wasteland* that the poet describes in the poem is not the geographical *Wasteland* but the "emotional and spiritual sterility" of modern man. Eliot compares the 20th c forms of belief and disbelief with those of the past to show the moral, spiritual and psychological "loss" to the modern world. The poet successfully uses the literary technique of 'irony' to drive home the idea of the "loss" to the readers. 'Irony,' is a figure of speech in which we find a 'gap' between what is said and what is implied.

Keywords— *Wasteland, aridity, fragmentation, fertility, sterility, irony.*

Eliot demonstrates the fragmentation and the emotional, spiritual and psychological decay of modern world through several images and characters. The female characters in *The Wasteland* embody different types of fragmentation and the paper is an attempt to study these fragmented women characters in the poem. Eliot introduces several women characters in his poem to depict the fragmentation of the modern society. The female characters depicted in the poem belong to different social classes and historical backgrounds. Eliot has also included a few women characters in his poem from literature and ancient myths. He represents the decay and corruption of modern culture through these characters and through the ironic inversion of situations.

The Wasteland begins with an epigraph. The epigraph is taken from the *Satyricon* by Petronius in which a character called Trimalchio boasts in front of his friends about his encounter with the Cumaean Sibyl hanging in a cage. In Greek mythology, Sibyls were women with prophetic powers. The Cumaean sibyl was the most famous Sibyl renowned for her prophetic powers. The irony here is that the poem begins with a reference to Sibyl whose prophetic powers have declined. Sibyl was granted longevity by her lover Apollo for as many years as she held grains of sand in her hand. But she forgot to ask him for eternal youth and her love ended in "fear in a handful of dust." It is ironic that she also has to expose her desire to die to a drunkard like Trimalchio. The longevity is now her curse and she becomes the object of ridicule for drunkards like Trimalchio.

The Wastelanders are in a state of emotional paralysis. They prefer the artificial warmth of winter to the warm days of spring. It is a paradox that the winter kept them warm and

kept them buried under forgetful snow: "winter kept us warm in forgetful snow." The reality is that the Wastelanders show a reluctance to be shaken out of the complacency of winter and associated memories of winter. This could be a psychological reaction to the trauma of war experienced by them. So, April is not just cruel, it is the "cruellest month breeding lilacs out of the dead land." The seasonal change is not just disturbing but highly painful too. The lilac flower is a fertility symbol. But the rebirth or regeneration is a painful activity in the Wasteland and the stirring of dull roots or the sprouting of lilacs awakens memories and desires. Thus, spring becomes a painful reminder of the unpleasant memories of winter. The inhabitants of the Wasteland prefer to remain in the illusory warmth of the winter adjusting themselves to a meagre and frugal existence.

Marie Larisch's expedition to the mountains with her lover does not culminate in fulfilment of love; instead, the lines end with a "dry sterile" comment: "I read much of the night and go south in the winter." Similar is the ending of the tragic love story of Tristan and Isolde: "Oed' und leer das Meer." The Hyacinth girl appears seductive to her lover but their encounter ends in disenchantment. The Hyacinth flowers represent fertility. In spite of the conducive environment for lovemaking, her love remains unconsummated and the hyacinth girl becomes another victim of failed love.

We see the emergence of a pseudo prophetess in *The Waste Land*. The 'prophetess' of the modern world is Madame Sosostriis. She is in stark contrast to the Sibyl. Sibyl was endowed with divine prophetic powers but in the modern world, prophesying has dwindled into the business of fortune telling. Sibyl loses popularity in the modern world -

- she is ridiculed by everyone but the modern world easily accepts Sososttris and she is considered the “wisest woman in Europe with a wicked pack of cards.” The tragedy of the Wastelanders is that they go behind fake fortune tellers and not behind genuine prophets or seers. They mock the real and glorify the fake. The Wastelanders consider the ‘Tarot pack’ of cards used for divination as the “wicked pack of cards.” In fact, this pack of cards was used for divination in the past by prophets and seers. We do not know if the fortune teller of the modern world is using the same Tarot cards for fortune telling. Trust is lost in the Wasteland and Madame Sososttris is scared to hand over the horoscope through somebody to one of her clients: “...If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,/ Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:/ One must be so careful these days.” The fortune teller’s interpretations are mostly unreliable and she even instils a fear of “death by water” in her customers. But the vegetation myths mentioned in the poem suggest “death by water” and the consequent “rebirth” as a remedy for the wasteland. Also, Christianity talks about rebirth through baptism. It is here that we see the irony in Madame Sososttris’ warning to her client to fear “death by water.”

The aristocratic woman seated in her boudoir is yet another tragic figure in the wasteland. All her wealth does not give her any comfort or happiness in life. In the strained relationship with her husband/lover she is deprived of the emotional security required for a meaningful and fulfilling life. Her wealth, jewellery or perfumes cannot satisfy her emotional needs. The picture of the “change of Philomel” above the “antique mantel” and the “sad light” in which “a carved dolphin swam” add to the gloom of her room. The other “withered stumps of time” hung upon the wall terrify her and drive her insane. Her companion excludes her from his thoughts and hardly responds to her doubts making her even more insecure in his company and they both wait for someone to come and rescue them from outside “Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.”

The poem then shifts from the loneliness and splendour of the boudoir to the squalour of a pub. In order to depict this scene, Eliot uses an episode narrated by his house maid Ellen Kellond. Eliot himself explains in his “supplementary notes” to the poem that this episode is “pure Ellen Kellond.” Eliot introduces a few ordinary women from the public who lead unsophisticated, noisy and boisterous lives. Lil and her friends are assembled in a pub. These women rely on quick over – the -- counter remedies and Lil, we assume, lost her teeth after taking the pills prescribed by the chemist to terminate her pregnancy. But Lil is not greatly concerned about her appearance and her friends tease her for looking “antique” at 31. The irony is that the poet uses the word

“antique” to emphasise the premature aging of Lil rather than to suggest the beauty and elegance usually associated with the word “antique.” The bar tender reminds the women to clear the pub with repeated reminders: “Hurry up please; it’s time.” The illiterate women assembled in the pub do not obviously understand the literary connection of this exhortation. Neither does the bar tender seem to know the literary relevance of these lines. Again, Shakespeare’s lines end this section: “Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.” These are the final words of Ophelia in *Hamlet* before her drowning. The words of insane Ophelia are the parting words of the women. It is the informed reader who understands the irony created by the of the juxtaposition of these words.

The “Fire Sermon” takes the reader to the famous river Thames in London. In the past, the banks of river Thames used to be frequented by lovers. But there is hardly anyone visiting the river Thames now and this river remains a monument of lost glory. Spenser’s refrain “Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long” has lost its romantic charm in the modern world.

Tiresias, the hermaphrodite prophet makes his entry towards the middle of the poem. Eliot regards him as a figure or consciousness who unifies and brings all the different speakers in the poem into a single focal point in the poem. According to Eliot, what Tiresias sees is the meaning of the poem. Thus, Tiresias remains the symbolic centre rather than a character in the poem. He is a seer and a prophet who has lived the life of a man and a woman. Because of this unique bisexual experience and his prophetic vision, he is capable of predicting the fate of humanity. He is an all pervasive but a silent spectator in the modern Wasteland. He foresees the encounter between the typist and the house agent’s clerk and understands it from the perspectives of both the typist and her lover as he has lived both the lives. The relationship between the typist and her lover symbolises the failure of true love in the modern world. The typist has very little concern for her departed lover and her response to his departure is rather very casual: “Well now, that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.” Sexuality without any emotional intimacy has become a routine in the modern world. The typist is a very good example of a modern woman. The 20th c working woman, like her ancient counterpart Sibyl is also a victim of a shattered love affair.

The women in *The Wasteland* are not always portrayed as victims; at times they are portrayed as the *femmes fatales* or the fatal women to travellers on their journey to salvation. They become the seductresses who lure men away from their spiritual quest. The journey undertaken by the questing knight to the Chapel Perilous ends in Mrs Porter’s brothel.

The knight loses his way and reaches the brothel where his feet are washed in soda water. This is not the ablution at the entry into the Chapel Perilous. Instead, this ‘feet washing ceremony’ is intended to protect him from venereal diseases. And the knight in *The Wasteland* does not get the vision of the Holy Grail. The song of the infants singing in the cupole “et cex voix d’enfants chantant dans la cupole” is juxtaposed with the song of the ravished Phoibomela: “Twit twit twit/ Jug jug jug jug jug jug/So rudely forc’d.”

The song of the mythical Rhine maidens from Richard Wagner’s famous opera “Die Gotterdammerung” is heard in the background of the song of the three Thames daughters. Their song lamenting the loss of a magical hoard of gold in the river is contrasted with the lament on the loss of virginity of the Thames daughters. The melodious refrain “Weialala leia /Wallala leialala” intensifying the agony of the loss is heard against the casual narration of the Thames daughters about the loss of their virginity.

CONCLUSION

The women in the landscape of *The Wasteland* are shown mostly as the victims of suppressed or lost love. At times, they also become the *femmes fatales* to the travellers on their path to salvation. The modern world has lost many of the values that the ancient world possessed and has become emotionally and spiritually barren. Eliot highlights the sense of loss through an ironic juxtaposition of the present with the past and of the modern women with their mythical or literary counterparts.

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